

The Politics of Counterterrorism in India: Strategic Intelligence and National Security in South Asia. By PREM MAHADEVAN. New York, NY: IB Tauris, 2012. 320 pp. \$105.00 (cloth).

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At a time when mainstream media outlets describe the entire Western world as a target for radicalized fanatics affronted by progressive liberal values—second only to the “Arab world” whence the terrorist threat emanates—Prem Mahadevan forcefully directs our attention to India. Mahadevan compels the reader to consider that the world’s largest democracy—neighbor to terrorist hotbeds Pakistan and Afghanistan *and* victim of separatist (Khalistan), territorial (Kashmir), religious (Sikh and Jihadi), ethnic (tribal insurgencies in the North-East) and ideological (left extremism) terrorism—has a rich history of counterterrorism worth examining.

Mahadevan’s argument presupposes that counterterrorism is necessarily the domain of intelligence agencies, since terrorism is “covert” and “aimed at achieving a high level of *surprise*” (p. viii). Mahadevan notes that “the organisational deficiencies of Indian intelligence agencies have not varied across time and space,” yet the levels of counterterrorist success have (pp. 4, 13). Puzzled by this variation, he examines India’s counterterrorism responses to three diverse threats: the Khalistan separatist movement in the early 1980s, the Kashmiri separatist movement in the late 1980s, and pan-Islamist jihadism, which surfaced in the early 1990s. Mahadevan considers the counterterrorist response to the Khalistan movement the only case of a total counterterrorism success, seeing as the government was able to effectively contain and subsequently eliminate separatist violence (p. 184). In contrast, the Indian counterterrorist response to Kashmiri separatism only fulfills Mahadevan’s criteria for a partial counterterrorism success, and Pan-Islamist Jihadism, ostensibly “the most crucial [terrorist threat],” is judged a total failure (p. 193).

Based on a detailed analysis of these diverging counterterrorism trajectories, Mahadevan asserts that Indian counterterrorist failures are not failures of intelligence, but failures to act on intelligence. He suggests that the results of Indian counterterrorism vary depending on the “responsiveness of decision makers ... to strategic intelligence” (p. 8). When there is poor responsiveness to strategic intelligence, Mahadevan expects there to be a predictive intelligence failure. Mahadevan ascribes the Indian government’s poor responsiveness to strategic intelligence to four constraints: a lack of political consistency, a lack of political consensus, a lack of operational capacity, and a lack of operational coordination. The book thus proceeds in four sections, each corresponding to one of four constraints. Mahadevan suggests the four constraints represent a broader “disconnect that exists between strategic and tactical intelligence efforts in Indian counterterrorism” (p. 11).

This book is an exceedingly informative yet approachable foray into the understudied world of Indian counterterrorism. Mahadevan circumvents the constraints on data collection inherent to the study of intelligence and counterterrorism while rendering a final product that is accessible to researchers lacking both regional expertise and familiarity with security scholarship. In the first chapter alone, Mahadevan showcases a succinct timeline that traces the evolution of India’s intelligence agencies from the establishment of the Central Special Branch in 1887 all the way to the creation of the Research & Analysis Wing (R&AW) in 1968, devotes several pages to define knotty terms, delineates the scope of analysis, and even surveys several leading schools of thought. He presents a rich history of the relationship between India and Pakistan as it relates to the disputed territory of Kashmir, ultimately ascribing the majority of terrorist incidents described in the book either directly or implicitly to Pakistan, citing these incidents as the “[representation of] the continuation of a long-standing covert war” between Pakistan and India (p. 1). In addition to the laudable historical narrative, Mahadevan’s introduction also satisfies the conditions for

methodological rigor by justifying his case studies pursuant to the comparative method, entertaining alternative hypotheses, and precisely identifying the deficit in knowledge that his findings endeavor to fill.

Yet, Mahadevan's analysis rests on a series of problematic assumptions. Two of the three terrorist movements that he studies are motivated by territorial and separatist objectives. The "new terrorism" school of thought, which enjoys enduring popularity with scholars and pundits alike, would dispute that Khalistan or Kashmir can be compared to pan-Islamist Jihadism. They would classify the latter as "new" religious terrorism and consider it fundamentally distinct from territorial or separatist variants. Mahadevan has no defense against these hypothetical critiques, as he does not engage with the new terrorism literature. His broad definition of terrorism, which does not stipulate that the use or threat of violence be indiscriminate, further reflects his limited engagement with the terrorism literature. This disconnect with the terrorism literature resurfaces again when Mahadevan problematically assumes that terrorists necessarily have a "purpose" or act according to a rational-choice model (p. 6).

There are other problematic conceptualizations that underlie Mahadevan's entire analytical framework. Mahadevan introduces obvious biases about the viability of nonviolent counterterrorism into his work, claiming, for example, that "[t]here is no room for winning hearts and minds [in counterterrorism] (as normally prescribed by writers on counterinsurgency) ... [s]ince the terrorists use violence, so must the government" (p. 6). His operationalization of counterterrorism success and failure are similarly unsophisticated; a counterterrorist success is "defined as a situation in which the government succeeds in lowering the level of terrorist violence from that of previous years, as measured in terms of non-combatant fatalities within a region," and is only considered a total success "if violence ceases completely" (p. 7). The shortcomings of this crude operationalization become clear in the discussion on the role of the decompression effect in Khalistani counterterrorist success, where Mahadevan admits that the same 'healing hearts' approach adopted by prime minister VP Singh that resulted in a counterterrorist failure in the short run engendered a total counterterrorist success in the long run (pp. 184–186). The Khalistani case thus has important implications for pan-Islamic Jihadism, as it reveals that the outcome of a given counterterrorism strategy can change with time. The Jammu and Kashmir case is not unproblematic either—although Mahadevan acknowledges that the decompression effect could not work in the case of Kashmiri separatism, since "[f]oreign governments have viewed Kashmir as disputed territory, and not as an integral part of India like Punjab," he does not entertain international influence as an alternate hypothesis (p. 188).

Though there are obvious limitations to all retrospectively oriented studies, Mahadevan's thorough and systematic evaluation of Indian counterterrorism is nonetheless an excellent addition to the field.